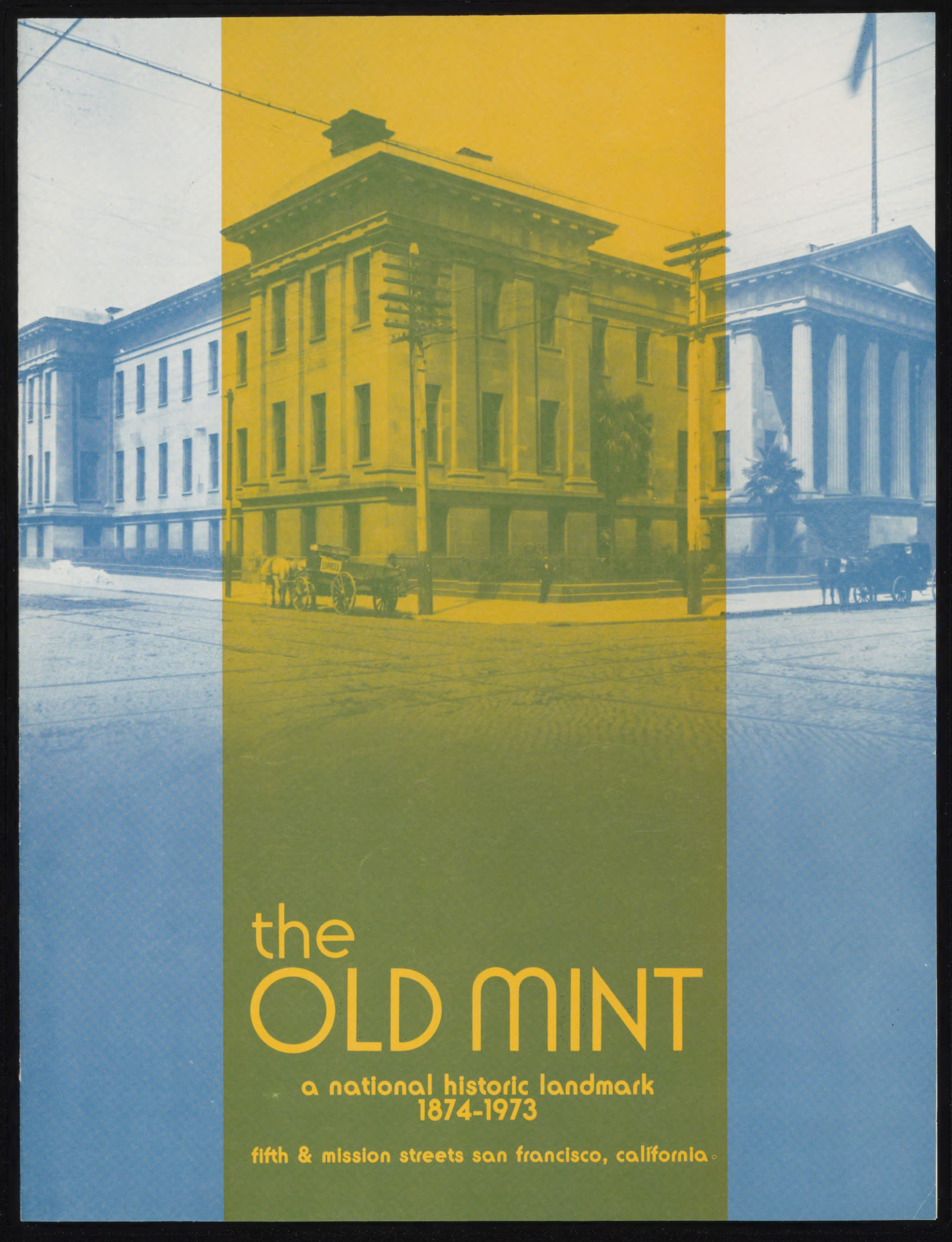




the OLD MINT

a national historic landmark
1874-1973

fifth & mission streets san francisco, california.



GOLD! THERE'S GOLD! IN CALIFORNIA

When the rare yellow metal was found at Coloma (Sutter's Mill) by James W. Marshall in 1848 the cry of discovery ricocheted around the world.

The temptation of untold riches to be found in the land could not be denied. The California gold rush was on.

Prospectors swarmed into the territory and, by 1850, the gold mined in the hills had grown from a trickle to a deluge. The heavy outpour swamped the refining and coining facilities of the distant Philadelphia Mint and to continue to expose the precious cargo to the hazards of the time-consuming journey intensified the dangers to the ponderous load.

The coinage situation in the West was in a chaotic state. Many different kinds circulated—French Louis-d'ors, Dutch guilders, Indian rupees, Mexican reals, English shillings, as well as our own American pieces. Even so, there was a scarcity and gold dust, while acceptable, was not a convenient medium of exchange. To remedy the difficulty, private mints sprang up which converted gold into coins—but this was not a solution to the growing problem.

In a four year period, 1848 to 1852, California had turned from a collection of sleepy Spanish villages into a restless, prospering territory that led to statehood in 1850. The population had increased from 15,000 to about 250,000 and the mines had produced \$200,000,000 worth of gold.

Then, concurring in a recommendation from President Millard Fillmore that a branch Mint be established in California, Congress acted on July 3, 1852 and authorized the construction of a United States Mint at San Francisco.

A small building, just 60 feet square, was erected on Commercial Street and the Mint started receiving deposits on April 3, 1854.

Obstacles connected with the supply of materials retarded and diminished the coinage operations during that year. However, \$4,084,207, all in gold pieces, was coined between April and December, 1854, and gradually the coins there replaced the miscellaneous assortment in circulation.

Within ten years, it was apparent that the little Mint was sorely inadequate to meet the expanding coinage demands of the region. Again, a Mint with ample capacity to provide for the great mineral districts of the West was proposed. It was not until 1872-73, however, that the building was completed and the work of fitting up the necessary machinery, fixtures and apparatus was begun.

The new Mint at 5th and Mission was occupied in the summer of 1874, and was one of the best appointed Mints in the world. It was first considered unnecessarily large but the Director stated "... in fitting it up with a refining and coining capacity equal to the present demand it has been found necessary to occupy the entire building."

In its first full calendar year of operation, 1875, 1,250,600 gold pieces valued at \$24,674,000 were coined.

"The San Francisco Call" in its November 1, 1874, issue described the Mint as a noble, substantial structure and reported: "The fire department will have little trouble quenching any conflagration that may arise within its walls, and unless an earthquake gives it a subterranean quietus, it bids fair to stand up for centuries."

The Mint was destined to live up to this early assessment of its sturdy construction. The first critical test of survival was the holocaust that was the San Francisco earthquake and fire of April 18, 1906.

The disaster devastated the City of San Francisco. The city's water pipes broke under the onslaught of the violent quakes and fires raged unchecked throughout the area.

Just three weeks before the calamity, the Mint had completed a private water supply system of hydrants and hoses on each floor. Two wells located in the inner court supplied sufficient water for Mint employees and U. S. soldiers to fight a seven hour battle against the towering flames that licked at the iron shuttered windows.

The intense heat melted the glass in the windows and flying embers ignited a dozen small fires on the roof and in the courtyard where lumber and timber were stacked.

Fifty employees of the Mint whose own homes were in the path of the fire made it to work that day. Family worries competed with their devotion to the Mint. Duty won out. Around the clock for days on end they remained at their posts to man the one inch water hose and tote endless buckets of water to fire threatened areas in the building. They catnapped on cots whenever possible and passed out drinking water to the campers clustered outside the building that had the only water supply in the vicinity.

The Mint and its contents were saved. The destruction of the city gas works, however, forced a halt to the melting, annealing and assaying operations fueled by gas.

Left standing virtually alone amid the rubble of the disaster with \$200,000,000 in gold in its

vaults, the Mint was the only financial institution in the city able to open its doors for business.

The subtreasury had been destroyed, bank buildings lay in ruins; the banking system ground to a dead stop.

An orderly flow of money in and out of the city was vital to its survival and to the well-being of the people. Only the Mint was in a position to begin accepting and administering the relief funds that poured in and, until the banks could once again operate, the Mint handled all remittances to and from the city and disbursements within the city as well.

San Francisco didn't take long to restore and revitalize itself and the Mint was there as the city grew and prospered anew.

The commercial demands of the nation also increased and further expansion of minting facilities was necessary. In the summer of 1937 San Francisco personnel made another move; this time into an imposing marble edifice some distance from the principal business center where the old building is located.

Known as the San Francisco Assay Office, today it manufactures one-cent pieces for general circulation bearing the famous "S" mintmark. It also produces the proof and uncirculated coin sets for sale to the public. In 1971, it added the 40% silver proof and uncirculated specimens of the Eisenhower dollar coin to its special coin programs.

After minting operations were transferred from Mission Street to the new location at 155 Hermann Street, the Old Mint was occupied by other government agencies until 1968.

Then the Old Mint was finally vacated and declared surplus to government needs. Empty and swiftly deteriorating, the unsightly building became the center of swirling controversy between agitators for its demolition to make way for a high rise and instigators for its preservation and restoration as an architectural, cultural and historical landmark.

In the spring of 1972, President Nixon intervened to save the old building from its uncertain fate. He announced the transfer of the building from the General Services Administration to the Department of the Treasury's Bureau of the Mint for restoration and continued use by the government and the enjoyment of the public.

In a sudden burst of activity, workmen began arriving at the old, deserted building to accomplish the restoration. A short year later, in April 1973, the Mint's Special Coins and Medals and Computer employees were able to move their



1. The Superintendent's Office as originally furnished.
2. The Superintendent's Office before the restoration.
3. The Superintendent's Office after the restoration.



The Old Mint after the 1906 earthquake and fire. Note the remarkable condition of the building.

The disaster devastated the City of San Francisco. The city's water pipes broke under the onslaught of the violent quakes and fires raged unchecked throughout the area.

mushrooming operations into the commodious rooms in the rear of the building, newly renovated and equipped to speed the processing of millions of mail orders received yearly from the public for the special coins and medals produced by the Mint.

The move back to the Old Mint adds another historical highlight to the continuing story of the building's existence. It is the first public building to open in compliance with Public Law 92-362, providing for the adaptive use of surplus historic structures.

Preservation for its own sake is rarely enough. Unless historic buildings can also be made to serve a useful purpose, the danger is always present they will be destroyed as obsolete and a part of our nation's past will be lost forever.

The interior of the Old Mint has been completely rehabilitated to lead this double life and the exterior restoration is expected to be completed within a year or two.

In the meantime, the museum rooms authentically restored to their original 1874 appearance are open to the public. And exhibits of historical and educational significance will continue to be developed.

The lofty-ceilinged rooms and corridors once echoed with the footsteps of Sarah Bernhardt, William Cullen Bryant, Henry Ward Beecher, General Ulysses S. Grant, Marjory Rambeau, Rutherford B. Hayes and Mark Twain, to name a few of the famous visitors.

Now teeming with new and useful life, the beauty of its past preserved, the welcome mat is out once again. The old building that has survived time, earthquake, fire and abandonment and that has played such a crucial role in the growth of California and the West has re-opened for visitors.